

November 17, 2010

Marlene H. Dortch, Secretary
Federal Communications Commission
445 Twelfth Street, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20554

CG Docket No. 10-210

DA 10-2112

FCC Public Notice Comments – Specialized CPE Distribution Programs

Dear Ms. Dortch:

I. Introduction

The Helen Keller National Center for Deaf-blind Youth and Adults (HKNC) is very pleased to respond to the Federal Communication Commission's (FCC) request for comment on the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act of 2010. HKNC has long awaited this triumphant moment.

The HKNC Act (Section 203) mandates the National Center, through an act of Congress, with three specific purposes which align with this legislation:

- (1) provide specialized intensive services, or any other services, at the Center or anywhere else in the United States, which are necessary to encourage the maximum personal development of any individual who is deaf-blind;
- (2) train professionals and allied personnel at the Center or anywhere else in the United States to provide services to individuals who are deaf-blind; and
- (3) conduct applied research, development programs, and demonstrations with respect to communication techniques, teaching methods, aids and devices, and delivery of services.

As the sole national program exclusively serving individuals who are deaf-blind, their families and the professionals who work with them throughout their life span, we have a unique perspective on this initiative.

II. Eligibility

In the HKNC Act Section 206 (2) the term "*individual who is deaf-blind*" means ANY individual who meets the definition criteria. This includes individuals who may or may not be eligible for vocational rehabilitation services. The definition of deaf-blindness in the HKNC Act has historically permitted an inclusive determination for our services to include all American citizens who are deaf-blind. Due to the diversity among people who are deaf-blind and the varying degree of vision and hearing loss, the definition allows us to take a more individual approach rather than a systems approach to determining eligibility for services. This may include consultation with medical, educational and vocational rehabilitation professionals who can provide expert guidance into the specific needs of the individual taking into account functional living skills, individual abilities and context.

Of particular importance is consideration when assessing the eligibility of older adults, whose numbers are exponentially growing. This population will pose an additional challenge due to the inclination of the group to not self identify as deaf-blind and the disconnect with service providers to this community. HKNC, through its national Confident Living Program for Older Adults, often encounters this situation.

III. Scope: Covered Equipment

There are limited options and a lack of innovation in the types of specialized Customer Premises Equipment (CPE) currently available to individuals who are deaf-blind. The development of adaptive equipment is often exclusionary or only meets the needs of a select few of this population.

The HKNC has continuously worked collaboratively with manufacturers and others to expand and improve available equipment options. This will always be an on-going effort as technology continues to advance. We support the NDBEDP to include provisions for equipment upgrade and repair. The period of time an applicant is eligible for an upgrade needs to take into account the possibility of an individual's progressive vision and hearing loss as well as the new technologies available. Frequent updates within a five year period is customary.

One example of technology innovation through collaboration is in the NIDRR-funded Captioned Braille demonstration project undertaken by the Helen Keller National Center, NPR, and Towson University. This project builds on the development of Captioned Radio systems with communications protocols and firmware solutions to port to Refreshable Braille Devices for use by the deaf-blind. Through new digital radios with Bluetooth and USB compatibility with existing Refreshable Braille Devices the tens of thousands of Americans who are deaf-blind may soon be able to "listen" to the hundreds of daily radio programs that inform the daily dialog of American life.

We believe this project will advance accessibility by low income deaf-blind individuals by removing barriers to this free, over the air broadcast service enjoyed by virtually all Americans. For the special mobility issues of the deaf-blind the project is incorporating alerting access to wireless pagers and bed-shakers as well as on-demand replay of emergency messages whenever critical safety of life issues require immediate shelter in place or evacuation action. Seconds can save lives, and for those with restricted communications, coupled with mobility obstacles these considerations should receive appropriate priorities. Since radio is often the only communications system remaining available when the power grid goes down we believe including emergency alerting tailored to the deaf blind are essential.

The Helen Keller National Center is providing expert consumer guidance through staff support and access to deaf-blind individuals to define requirements, assess the utility of iterative prototypes, and validate final user interface criteria. NPR and Towson are providing the technology integration and cognitive assessment structure to achieve a successful demonstration for hand off to industry.

In considering such innovations as described, we encourage a critical review of the language in the current definition. The term "Customer Premises Equipment" limits the scope and reach

intended from this legislation. The word “premises” restricts the person who is deaf-blind to a location and neglects the recognized advances in Technology and their mobile capabilities.

The economic challenges faced by individuals who are deaf-blind create a barrier and broadens the gap between the haves and have nots with respect to adaptive technology. The determining factor for many adults in receiving state assistance for such equipment may be their employment status. Unfortunately, the communications technology that can provide individuals with the ability to obtain information and compete in the job market actually becomes a greater liability when it is not affordable or obtainable for the very purpose it is needed. This creates a Catch 22.

For individuals experiencing a vision and hearing loss mitigating isolation is a way of life. Individuals wanting to be more involved on a civic or social basis cannot afford the purchase cost of the equipment or the cost of specialized training to effectively use such equipment. Barriers to learning about and getting any “hands on” experience with adaptive technology equipment are commonplace due to the diverse communication methods preferred by individuals who are deaf-blind. When one considers the geographic dispersion of individuals who are deaf-blind throughout the United States, especially in rural settings, building local capacity is challenging. The HKNC through its infrastructure of Regional offices and its thirty-nine (39) affiliates may be able to assist in this endeavor. Of concern is that there is no central information resource defining adaptive technology distributors’ locations and their resources available to individuals who are deaf-blind. If the state equipment distributor model is considered, a centralized resource or method to inform the community of its availability is needed. In addition, the current accessibility to these services can be improved through standards in practice, including practices of eligibility determination, training, distribution and maintenance.

The severe shortage of training and qualified personnel further exacerbates the issue. There are no national certification standards currently and limited training opportunities available to professionals. A “Train the Trainer” model with a national standard would ensure effective execution of set goals. A National Training Team could be established utilizing a blended model of on-line and face-to-face methodologies. The select few who master these competencies currently through efforts at HKNC or through other formal and informal methods, cannot possibly meet the growing needs of individuals. An affiliated network of trainers could be established on a regional or statewide basis and be juxtaposed with distribution eligibility.

Research and Development

The HKNC strongly supports a percentage of this funding being directed at research and development efforts. We recognize that collaborative efforts can lead to success because they maximize contributions from all users and experts’ perspectives and pool resources.

Creating more opportunities through government entities such as the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) can support these targeted outcomes. This does not preclude partnerships with corporations and should not dismiss their responsibility for universal accessibility standards by developers of mainstream communication devices. Should the Commission want to explore the feasibility of HKNC taking a more active role in working in

tandem with the already existing Equipment Distribution Programs (EDPs), the Center has the infrastructure of ten (10) Regional Offices and a headquarters with a state of the art Adaptive Technology Center that could accommodate training. HKNC is a national resource for training trainers. However the scope is limited due to resources currently available.

The priorities for both specific assistive technology intended for the deaf-blind population and adaptation of the mainstream communication devices for the general population require research and development efforts. One necessity is input from deaf-blind users as a means to establish National priorities.

Conclusion

The mission of The Helen Keller National Center is to enable individuals who are deaf- blind to live and work in the community of their choice. Without the appropriate technology in the hands of people who are deaf-blind, this mission cannot be fulfilled. We embrace the provisions of this legislation and look forward to the achievement of its implementation and outcomes.

Respectfully submitted

Joseph J. McNulty
Executive Director
The Helen Keller National Center for Deaf-Blind Youths and Adults